

News from Ed Markey

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MARKEY CONCERNED BY INCOMPLETE BACKGROUND CHECKS AT NUCLEAR REACTORS

Salem whistleblower informs lawmaker of security breaches during refueling periods

Washington, DC: Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, today released a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) calling on the NRC to respond to allegations that Public Service Electric & Gas Co., which operates the Salem nuclear reactors in southern New Jersey, may be allowing temporary employees whose background checks have not yet been completed access to vital areas of the nuclear reactors during the refueling process. The letter also called on the NRC to determine whether this is occurring at other nuclear reactors as well.

"I am concerned to hear that the operator of the Salem nuclear plant is reportedly failing to perform even its own minimal background checks on employees," said Rep. Markey. "Every additional day a reactor stays shut down to be refueled means less money for the operator, but corporate profits should not be given precedence over community safety and national security. The NRC needs to immediately investigate these reports. We simply can't allow such unacceptable practices to continue."

One common source of pressure to waive security requirements is the refueling process. According to the Nuclear Energy Institute's website, the average time reactors are shut down for refueling has gone down from an average of 100 days in 1990 to an average of 44.5 days in 1999. The shorter the time the reactor is shut down, the more money the reactor licensee will make. Rep. Markey has been informed by a senior security officer at the Salem nuclear station that employees whose security badges are labeled "Category 6," which indicates that their background checks have not yet been completed, are being granted security waivers so that they can access vital areas of the reactor so that the refueling process can be completed faster.

Rep. Markey recently raised concerns about the adequacy of NRC's security background check requirements for reactor employees, including those who are foreign nationals. As the NRC indicated in its March 4, 2002 correspondence, the NRC only requires criminal background searches (as opposed to searches designed to uncover potential links to terrorist groups) to be performed, "the [criminal background] search is limited to the United States" and that "Licensees determine access to the facility regarding foreign applicants on a "best effort" basis." Many reports have indicated that members of Al Qaeda consider U.S. nuclear facilities to be attractive terrorist targets.

Rep. Markey's letter asks the NRC to clarify its policy on allowing employees whose background checks have not yet been completed to access vital areas of nuclear reactors, to investigate the allegations made regarding the Salem nuclear reactors, and to determine whether similar activities may be taking place at other reactors. Copies of the letter can be found at http://www.house.gov/markey/iss_terrorism.htm